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AUTHOR Driscoll, Jeanne B.
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ABSTRACT

A survey of Returning Women Students at The Pennsylvania State University was conducted during the Spring 1975 term. The 53 women had a variety of backgrounds, but had many mutual concerns. Some were undergraduates, others were graduate students; some were enrolled full-time, more were part-time, and 92% were majoring in non-technical fields. Although three-fourths of them had been away from formal education at least 10 years, 42% had made the decision to return within 10 years after they first left. Their rationale for returning fell into three main categories: enter a new profession/develop a new skill, personal enrichment/intellectual stimulation, or obtaining a degree. A variety of circumstances influenced or hindered their return, but prominent among them were finances and commitments to the home. Most of the women were planning to pursue a career after graduation, but less than half had decided on a specific occupation. Over 70% indicated that their department or professionals in the field would be sources utilized for additional career information. The women want concrete practical information and programs. Their suggestions and input into programs and services should not be overlooked. (Author)

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REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF A SURVEY ON

THE ASSESSMENT OF THE STATUS OF RETURNING WOMEN STUDENTS

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Jeanne Baker Driscoll

Spring, 1975

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Within the last decade, ever-increasing numbers of women who did not attend college or obtain a college degree immediately after high school have been returning to college campuses to do academic work. Very little information has been collected or is available about these women: their backgrounds, their present problems and their future plans.

At colleges and universities with a sizeable enrollment of returning women students, these women have banded together to form their own organization. Members of the group help each other with problems and give each other support. The organization thus receives more formal recognition from other parts of the institution. At Penn State, these returning women have created the group called Returning Women Students. In an effort to better identify the concerns of returning women students, the Career Development and Placement Center surveyed members of the Returning Women Students organization during the Spring Term, 1975. Although all women who have returned to school at Penn State may not be members, it was felt that the Returning Women Students organization would contain in its membership a very representative sample.

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A survey questionnaire consisting of fourteen questions was developed. The introduction portion of the questionnaire concentrated on obtaining a demographic background on the respondent. The first six questions

related to the decision and implementation of that decision to return to school. The remaining eight questions concerned career information. The names and addresses of current members of Returning Women Students were obtained from the organization's roster, and the entire population of 115 women was included in the initial mailing. (Note: Self-addressed, stamped envelopes were not included.)

One month after the questionnaires were mailed out, a follow-up telephone campaign was initiated. Since the returns were anonymous, non-respondents could not be identified. Therefore, attempts were made to contact the entire survey population. As a result of these efforts ninty-two percent (n=106) of the members were contacted and the number of returns was augmented to sixty-four percent (n=74). For a variety of reasons (i.e. graduation, change of plans, health) twenty-one members indicated that they were no longer active students, therefore, the questionnaire did not pertain to them. The remaining responses (n=53) constituted fifty-six percent of the adjusted population (N=94).

The results obtained from the questionnaire are presented below. The responses to open-ended questions have been grouped into common categories. Since the number of responses varied from item to item, a separate n is listed for items which received less than 53 (100%) responses.

An examination of the demographic information obtained in this survey indicated a wide range of backgrounds: thirteen women were full-time students, twenty-eight were part-time (n=41), and eleven indicated they held non-degree status. Graduate and undergraduate levels were almost

equally represented: twenty-one at the graduate level and twenty-five at the undergraduate level (n=46). The distribution of undergraduates was quite broad: two freshmen, seven sophomores, six juniors, and eight seniors (n=23).

Forty-three women indicated the number of members in their household. A great majority (81%) had three to five people living in the household. The findings are reproduced below:

Number in Household	Number of Responses
1	2%
2	7%
3	18%
4	28%
5	35%
6	9%
8	4%

A variety of majors (twenty-three different ones) were listed by thirty-seven women. However, they were highly clustered (92%) in what are labeled the non-technical fields.

Education Majors	30%
Business Majors	5%
Science Majors	3%
Liberal Arts Majors	46%
Human Development	5%
Arts	11%

Age varied from twenty-one to fifty-six. Fifty women responded to the question about age. Eighty percent placed in the 30-49 age range.

21-29	8%
30-39	48%
40-49	32%
50-56	12%

Forty-nine women responded to the item regarding marital status. Marriage out-ranked all other categories by four to one. The classifications reflect only those categories listed by the respondents, since the item was open-ended.

Single	6%
Married	80%
Divorced	10%
Separated	4%

All of the women who completed the questionnaire (n=53) responded to the first six questions. In items three through six many of the returning women students listed multiple reasons, conditions or problems. Because of that factor, the percentage total will exceed 100 for these questions.

1.	How many years had you been away from formal education?	Less than one 2%
		One to five 13%
		Five to ten 13%
		Ten to twenty 51%
		More than twenty 21%

2. At what point in your life did you make the decision to return to school?

At the time I terminated formal education	15%
Less than one year after termination	2%
One to five years after termination	19%
Five to ten years after termination	6%
Ten to twenty years after termination	43%
More than twenty years later	15%

Although only two percent of the women had been away from formal education for less than one year, seventeen percent had made the decision to return to school within a year after they terminated. Thirty-six percent made the decision to return within five years of initial termination; however only fifteen percent actually implemented that decision in five years or less. The peak time period for both the decision (43%) and the implementation (51%) of returning to school seems to be the ten to twenty year span.

3. Please list the primary reasons for your decision to return to school.

Enter a new profession, develop a new skill	62%
Personal enrichment, intellectual stimulation	32%
Obtaining a degree was a personal goal	23%

Comments included such things as: "I must start working and need a skill." "I wanted to learn more about fields which I had not studied when I was a full-time student." "Finally, it was my turn."

4. What conditions made your return to school possible?

Financially possible	64%
Fewer home commitments	42%
Encouragement from important others	25%
Determination, a stronger self-image	15%
A gradual start	8%
Accessibility, availability	8%
More time (retired, finished another job)	8%

One woman put it this way, "Finally, I had enough money and children were old enough to be reasonably easy to arrange for; mostly, I just decided to do it."

5. What were the primary obstacles which you encountered in implementing your decision to return to school?

Home responsibilities	40%
Resistance from spouse (or important others)	19%
Financial difficulties	19%
Time limits (scheduling, studying)	19%
Lack of self-confidence	13%
Guilt feelings	8%
Problems with Penn State (transportation, classes, etc.)	8%
None	8%

6. After returning to school, were there certain problems you encountered that at times seemed overwhelming and affected your academic progress?

Conflicts between domestic and academic responsibilities	34%
Coping with Penn State (large classes, inflexibility, etc.)	32%
Concerns about course work, competition, studying	26%
Time limits: setting schedules, priorities	17%
Finances	15%
No	25%

Some of the individual comments may be more revealing. "My husband used to pick arguments with me when I was studying for mid-terms, finals, etc. Except for this slight hazard, I found the academic scene refreshing, interesting and a delightful experience." "I had an exaggerated idea of the amount of work it was necessary to do and spent over-much energy to make sure I "made it"." "It is difficult to run from office to office trying to get things done, when one lives alone with a small child." "None other than the pressures of trying to play all roles--at home and academically--100%."

In giving her "no" response, perhaps one women summed up for others. "My academic progress has assumed a position of significant priority, and has, therefore, not been affected negatively or hampered in any way. However, there have been problems (in other areas) and certainly very emotional encounters on occasion."

From the responses made, well over half (62%) of the returning women students have a career orientation. Sixty-four percent indicated that it was now financially possible for them to return to school; however, nearly twenty percent mentioned that they are still encountering financial difficulties. Forty-two percent pointed out that they had fewer home commitments yet nearly as many (40%) mentioned home responsibilities as an obstacle. Only twenty-five percent mentioned that they received encouragement from families or important others when they decided to return to school. Nineteen percent mentioned resistance from an important family member or significant other as an obstacle.

Forty-seven women responded to at least one of the next three items, which related to career plans after completing their degree.

7A. Have you decided on a career?

Yes	79%
No	15%
No Response	6%

7B. If yes, what is it? (Examples of several career areas followed.)

Education	41%
Social Services	22%
Business	14%
Health Services	8%
Communications	11%
Fine Arts	5%

Of those who indicated that they had chosen a career, seventy-six percent listed a career area. Twenty-four percent did not list a career, but mentioned a specific occupation. There were a total of thirty-seven positive responses to the question.

7C. How recently did you decide?

Thirty-four people indicated during what time period they had made their career decision. Eighty-two percent of the respondents made that decision within the last five years.

Within the last year	32%
One to two years ago	35%
Three to five years ago	15%
Six to ten years ago	3%
More than ten years ago	15%

8A. Have you decided on a specific occupation? (Examples of specific occupations followed.)

Yes	47%
No	34%
No Response	19%

8B. What is it?

Of the forty-seven percent (n=22) who responded affirmatively to part A, seventy-three percent subsequently listed a specific occupation in part B and fourteen percent listed a career area

instead of an occupation. An additional fourteen percent did not answer that part of the question even though they had indicated they had chosen a specific occupation. The purpose of questions seven and eight was to determine the extent to which returning women students had refined their career alternatives.

Out of the forty-seven respondents, fifteen percent gave the same response to 8b, as they did to 7b, so they either repeated an occupational response or a career response. It would seem that these people were not differentiating between career areas and specific occupations. Another fifteen percent responded affirmatively to question seven, but did not respond to question eight. These people had perhaps chosen a career area, but had not singled out an occupation, so ignored question eight. Another explanation could be that they felt they had encountered the same inquiry in question seven.

9. Name at least two occupational alternatives for your career field. (Examples followed.)

There were thirty-six responses to the question. Aside from some demographic information, this item on the questionnaire received the fewest number of responses. The intent of this item was also to assess the amount of career information returning women students already had accumulated.

Seventy-five percent of those responding did list occupational alternatives in their career fields. Twenty-five percent listed career fields instead of occupational alternatives. Six people who answered question seven and/or question eight, did not complete question nine.

10. Where did you find career information? No examples were mentioned with this question, so there were no "hints." Since the item was open-ended, more than one source could be listed; again, percentages will not total one-hundred percent.

From this sample, one can see that the Career Development and Placement Center ranks a distant third as to the women's previously utilized sources of information. Departmental contacts and personal acquaintances account for fifty percent of the responses.

The department	26%
Personal contacts	24%
Career Development and Placement Center	13%
Past experience	8%
Have not found	8%
Classes	8%
Potential employers	8%
Have not explored	8%
Returning Women Student Meetings	5%
Pattee Library	3%

11. Do you feel that you have adequate information about career opportunities in your major? The item received forty-two responses.

More than half of the women felt the need to obtain more information about career opportunities in their major, but the majority was not overwhelming.

Yes	45%
No	55%

12. If you wanted more information about your career, where would you go for your primary source of information? Again, the forty-one people who answered the question could list more than one source.

About thirty percent of the women felt they could utilize the CDPC for career information. However, over seventy percent would go to either the department or professionals in the field.

The department	37%
Professional in the field	34%
Career Development and Placement Center	29%
Government sources	5%
Library	5%
Ask for a referral	2%
Don't know	10%

13. "As you think about pursuing a career, do you feel the need for assistance in any of the following areas?"

Only three people out of thirty-eight indicated that they did not need any assistance. The remaining thirty-five checked at least one of the following areas. Sixty-six percent of that thirty-five checked more than one area.

Writing a letter of application	3%
Writing a resume	14%
Preparing for a job interview	6%
Developing job search strategies	54%
Identifying potential employment sources	69%

It appears that these women are very much interested in identifying potential sources of employment. Perhaps they feel that once employment sources are identified, they will then consider the nuts and bolts of resume writing and job interviewing. The responses could also be demonstrating that these women know about resumes and interviews from past experience, but are having more difficulty identifying employers in a professionally oriented field.

14. "What suggestions do you have regarding special services or programs in career education that could be extended to returning students?"

The last question enlisted a variety of responses, which fell into three main areas. Thirty-seven people responded to the item. Several mentioned more than one area.

Responses about career information	43%
Orienting women to and acquainting them with Penn State	41%
Educating Penn State personnel about returning women students	41%

Career information is very important to members of the group. Responses included: "Data on jobs/occupations in the 70's with pay skills and/or age barriers." "Having available information in chosen fields and helping in selection of fields." "Special career development people should be assigned to returning women students."

Making the returning student aware of Penn State operations was also frequently mentioned. "Need more information about existing services and scholarships and loans that are available ." "An orientation period so returning students can get a feel for what's ahead instead of getting smacked." "How to study information is helpful." "I needed to be able to meet other women in my age group who were engaged in academic work."

Respondents also felt that personnel at the University needed some education about women who were returning to school. "Make financial assistance programs available to women students regardless of marital status." "Educating the various departments about being tolerant of returning women students. They should be taken seriously

even if taking one course." "Day Care, recruiting returning students, credit for life's experience, etc.--Drew University is a good example of what can be done for the returning woman student."

In summary, it can be said that returning women students have a variety of backgrounds, but have many mutual concerns. There were twice as many part-time students as there were full-time students. Graduates and undergraduates were about equally represented. Eighty percent were married and lived in a household with three to five persons. Almost all (92%) had non-technical majors. Age ranged from 21 to 56, but was clustered between 35-44 (44%).

Almost three-fourths (72%) of the Returning Women Students had been away from formal education at least ten years. However, forty-two percent had made the decision to return within ten years after they first left. Their rationale for returning fell into three main categories: enter a new profession/develop a new skill, personal enrichment/intellectual stimulation, or the goal of obtaining a degree. A variety of circumstances influenced or hindered their return, but prominent among them were finances and commitments to the home.

Most of the women do seem to be planning to pursue a career upon completion of their degree. Most (82%) of them made that decision within the last five years. Less than half have decided on a specific occupation. Some of the respondents did not seem to readily differentiate between a career and an occupation, and may be in need of additional career information. Twenty respondents did indicate that they did not feel they had adequate career information.

Half of the women went to either their department or to personal contacts for the information they had accumulated. Seventy-one percent indicated that their department or professionals in the field would be sources utilized for additional career information. The women indicated they were most interested in identifying potential sources of employment.

The suggestions aired by the women indicate that they feel some adaptation on their part might be necessary. However, the institution also needs to be educated so that it might better adapt to this "new" group of students. The women want concrete, practical information and programs. Their input into programs and services should not be overlooked.

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